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A Short Review of the Judeo-Persian Literary Heritage and Judeo-Persian Dialects

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The first known personality in Judeo-Persian literature is Bābā'ī ben Lotf, a Jewish poet and historian from Kāshān, who most probably lived between 1613 and 1662. According to his own writings, he was publicly forced to convert to Islam, and lived for a period of time overtly as a Moslem, while secretly maintaining his Jewish faith and ceremonies. He composed two works in verse form: the first is a historical poem called *Ketāb-e Anūsī* (The Book of a Forced Conversion), which describes the persecutions, restrictive laws, mass expulsions, and pillages the Iranian Jews endured. This work is considered highly authentic, as the described events correspond to real historical data confirmed by European historiographers, Christian missionaries, and travelers. *Ketāb-e Anūsī* gives the reader details about the organizational, socio-economic, and religious situation of Iranian Jews during this period, and thus this book can be considered one of the earliest sources exploring the life of Persian Jewry in the 17th century. The second legacy of Bābā'ī ben Lotf is a short poem entitled *Monājāt-nāme,* a eulogy in panegyric form honoring the prophet Elijah. Both these works are in the expected Judeo-Persian.

The second figure is Bābā'ī ben Farhād, who is best known for his versified chronicle of the Kāsnān Jews, called *Ketāb-e sargozašt-e Kāšān* (Book of Kāshānī Events), covering the Afghan invasion between 1722 and 1730. The book also includes events concerning Jews from two other major towns in Iran: Isfahan and Shiraz. Bābā'ī ben Farhād was the grandson of Bābā'ī ben Lotf, and most likely the leader of the Kāshān Jewish community. Together with other Kāshāni Jews, Bābā'ī ben Farhād underwent the forced conversion to Islam while secretly continuing to observe his Jewish faith. *Ketāb-e sargoḏašt-e Kāšān* is of further relevance for registering certain historical facts, which elsewhere we do not encounter as such. This chronicle provides, for instance, historically valuable information about the Afghans' attacks on Persian cities,

the author's hometown Kāshān, and Isfahan. It also describes Nāder-Shāh's struggle against Afghan invasions. *Sargozašt-e Kāšān* accentuates that the Kāshān Jewish community was prosperous and that they were predominately engaged in textile and silk trade. Another interesting fact about Bābā'ī's works is the description of synagogues in

the city of Kāshān: according to him, there were thirteen active synagogues in the town at that time, a number bigger than the number of synagogues in almost every other city across Persia. *Ketāb-e sargozašt-e Kāšān* is the only known work of Bābā'ī Ben Farhād.[1]

In one of my early essays regarding Judeo-Persian poetry, published in Hebrew, Amnon Netzer (1934-2008) mentioned about sixty poets. Later on, he was able to find around thirty additional writers of Jewish origin, who predominately wrote in Judeo-Persian. Iranian Jewish literates expressed their spiritual world perception and their religious and social experiences in a poetical language. In the research history of Iranian literature, exploring and analyzing Judeo-Persian poetry is quite a young approach, and so work on the Iranian Jewish poets and their vita still requires expansion. Scholars might need to invest decades before we achieve an evaluable corpus of data for Judeo-Persian studies.

However, the question remains whether other religious minorities in Iran also possess literary legacies in their local dialects or in Persian? Next to Iranian Jews, the Armenians had considerable literary activity, particularly in the Parthian era (247 BC - 224 AD). However, amongst all non-Moslem Iranians, the Jews are the only minority whose literary heritage is solely in Persian. Armenians in particular were never completely assimilated into Iranian society, and have preserved their language up to this very day; thus, there is no Persian poetry composed by Armenians during the classical periods.

Fortunately, we have a good corpus of Judeo-Persian studies, and the research in this discipline is still growing. I am honored to be the editor of the two volumes of *Pādyāvand - Judeo-Iranian and Jewish Studies Series* (Mazda Publisher, Los Angeles 1996-1997), which both focus on Jewish Iranian literary heritage from the classical periods until contemporary times. The main incentive for publishing the *Pādyāvand* was to introduce the history and culture of the Iranian Jewish community to the outside world.[3]

Various world archives, including those housed in Jerusalem, London, New York, Vienna, etc. can attest to this. We find fragments of Ferdowsi's epic *Shāhname*, Rumi's *Mathanawi*, Attar's *Mantegh-ol-teyr*, Nezāmi's *Haft Peykar,* the sonnets of Hāfez, and other literary works. At first, such an undertaking seems obsolete and repetitive. In fact, however, the act of writing in Hebrew bore the primary significance of practicing a sacred language, and it was considered an admirable and worthy undertaking. Secondly, the statistics shows that the rate of literacy among the Iranian Jews in pre-modern Iran was very low. The number

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of Jewish individuals who could access learning centers and educational institutions was extremely restricted, mainly limited to wealthy families, while Hebrew as a liturgical and religious language had more spread among the Iranian Jews. Transcribing and transliterating Persian literary masterpieces made these valuable treasures far more accessible to Iranian Jews.

Additionally, these Judeo-Persian manuscripts–due to their philological and phonological characteristics–are valuable sources for the partial reconstruction and editing of original Persian sources, as they reveal a considerable number of Persian dialectal and phonetic specifications of the classical era. Due to the facility with which Hebrew letters can demonstrate the quality and quantity of Persian consonants and vowels, studying the Judeo-Persian scriptures reveals the varieties of and discrepancies between different prevalent Persian dialects. When we consider the demographical and geographical vastness of the areas in which Persian or Iranian dialects were spoken and where Iranian Jews lived, the transcription of Persian words into Hebrew means that otherwise untraceable, dormant dialects have been preserved. Among these manuscripts, during my research, I personally encountered a Judeo-Persian lexicon called *Sefer Hamelitsa* (Hebrew: ספר המליצה) written by Salomo ben Samuel {*Shlomo ben Shamuel} most likely at the end of the Ilkhanid era (~1300-1335) in the region Khwarazm (a large oasis region on the Amu Darya river delta in western Central Asia)[4]. This Hebrew-Judeo-Persian dictionary was first discovered and published by Wilhelm Bacher, a German philologist, towards the end of the 19th century. The work is crucial, as it preserves a valuable number of Iranian words in the Khwarazmian and the dialects spoken throughout other important literary regions of Iran during the Middle Ages. Furthermore, the glossary contains, in addition to Hebrew, Aramaic, Persian/Iranian words, a considerable amount of Syriac, Greek, and Arabic vocabulary, which is of philological and historical interest.

The second Judeo-Persian lexicon is called *Agron* (Hebrew: אגרו) and was composed by a writer called Moses in 1459 AD, approximately one and half centuries after *Sefer Hamelitsa.* It was written in Shirvan, a historical region in the eastern Caucasus, today a part of Azerbaijan Republic. *Agron* delivers numerous linguistic and dialectal materials for Judeo-Persian and Iranian studies. Some of the Judeo-Persian songs and folklores have been recited and sung during Iranian Jewish ceremonies, weddings, circumcision feasts, Bar- and Bat Mitzvahs, birthday festivals, and even funerals and mourning rituals[5].

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Unfortunately, we know very little about any such philosophical-theological activity. However, we encounter the name Rabi Yehuda ben Elazar, the writer of the theological work *Havot Yehuda* (Hebrew: חובות יהודה "The Duties of Judah"), in which the Iranian Jewish theologian discusses the fundamental questions of Judaism. Rabi Yehuda composed his work around 1686 in Kashan, and, considering the zeitgeist of his era, the nature of the questions discussed in his tractate, such as God's existence and the rationalization of religion and faith, seem to be very modern and intellectual. This property of his work suggests that it was unlikely Rabi Yehuda was the single Iranian Jewish thinker of the classical period, even though we do not have any further documents in this vein. The sociocultural environment that bore witness to this theologian's work likely inspired other intellectuals, whose works unfortunately did not survive to our time.

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Bibiograpfical Notes:

[1] This paper first published in French: *Une Revue historiographique du patrimoine littéraire judéo-persan et des dialectes judéo-persans,* in : *Bulletin d'études orientales Institut français du Proche-Orient, Tome LVIII, Paris, mars 2010*).

[1] S. W. Bacher, "Les Juifs de Perse aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles d'après les chroniques poétiques de Babai b. Loutf et de Babai b. Farhad," Revue des études juives 53, Paris, 1907, pp. 85-110 ; *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, BĀBĀ'Ī BEN FARHĀD.

[1] European scholars in particular the German writing academics were the first who dedicated research on Judeo-Persian. For example, in 1829 Konrad Dietrich Hassler published an article, which can be considered as the pioneer work in Judeo-Persian studies; 1838, Solomon Munk wrote a short study of fragment of a Judeo-Persian manuscript found in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Paul de Lagarde a German biblical scholar published a quite comprehensive description of the characteristic elements of Judeo-Persian in his *Persische Studien* (1884). Theodor Nöldeke, Karl Salemann, and Paul Horn–all three of German origin–followed de Laggard's viewpoint on the linguistic importance of Judeo-Persian for Ancient and Classical Iranian philology particularly and Iran Studies in general. Further contributions were also made by Wilhelm Bacher, Hermann Zotenberg, Alexander Kohut, Ignazio Guidi, Hermann Ethé, and Walter B. Henning. Cf. Gilbert Lazard, *La langue des plus anciens monuments de la prose persane*, Paris, 1961

[1] Cf. Amnon Netzer: *Pādyāvand*, 1996, p. xi.

[1] S. Bacher, Wilhelm: *Ein Hebräisch-persisches Wörterbuch aus dem Vierzehnten Jahrhundert*, Tübingen, Budapest 190

[1] For some examples of these Judeo-Persian Folkloric songs s. Netzer, Amnon: *Motakhab-e aš'ār-e fārsī az āsār-e yahūdīyān-e Īran*. Tehran 1352 |1972; idem: *Pādyāvad - Judeo-Iranian and Jewish Studies Series* Mazda Publisher 1996, Vol. I, p. 5-19 and p. 1-114: *Sorūd dar tārīkh-e yahūd-e īrān;* ibid. Volume II, Yeroushalmi, David: *Judeo-Persian Poet'Emrānī* in *Pādyāvad* Vol. II, 1997, p. 25-62

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[3] Cf. Amnon Netzer: *Pādyāvand*, 1996, p. xi.

[4] S. Bacher, Wilhelm: *Ein Hebräisch-persisches Wörterbuch aus dem Vierzehnten Jahrhundert*, Tübingen, Budapest 1900

[5] For some examples of these Judeo-Persian Folkloric songs s. Netzer, Amnon: *Motakhab-e aš'ār-e fārsī az āsār-e yahūdīyān-e Īran*. Tehran 1352 |1972; idem: *Pādyāvad - Judeo-Iranian and Jewish Studies Series* Mazda Publisher 1996, Vol. I, p. 5-19 and p. 1-114: *Seyrī dar tārīkh-e yahūd-e īrān;* ibid. Volume II, Yeroushalmi, David: *Judeo-Persian Poet'Emrānī* in *Pādyāvad* Vol. II, 1997, p. 25-62

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